

Sermon at Holy Trinity Hampton 28/7/13: John Phillips: Mark 5:25-34

'Thou has created us for thyself O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee.' These somewhat tired words of Augustine centuries ago may serve as a backdrop to the theme I want to expand this morning, with some help from the late John O'Donohue who was a remarkable spiritual writer, and this equally remarkable woman mentioned in the gospel.

Every time I hear this account of the woman who wanted just to touch the hem of Jesus' cloak in the hope of healing from years of suffering, I am inspired, and I find myself more easily in touch with my own sense of longing (restlessness). Just imagine for a moment the profound sense of longing within this woman. In the world in which she lived, moved, and had her being, just being born a woman was a lousy deal in itself. They were very much second class citizens and that's probably putting the reality politely. Add to that an ongoing medical problem in the face of prejudice, superstition, and appalling ignorance, and you have an individual isolated, disdained, persecuted, and very alone, alone with her longing for a better life. Yet, it is her very longing that drives her, compels her, with enormous single minded courage to reach out to the divine life she perceives in Jesus, and even this she does with restraint and much dignity. 'If I can just touch the hem of his garment, it will be enough, maybe I won't even be noticed.' Jesus' power and sensitivity responds readily to such a beautiful spirit, and she is not disappointed.

In the context of Christian spirituality, I believe, mainly through experience, that our longing is an essential and amazing gift from God, a gift to be embraced rather than feared. And I further believe that each person is in receipt of this gift, including those who deny, suppress, and ignore. Normally, when we look at others we inevitably think of them in practical terms. We experience them very concretely. We notice the way they look, the role they play, habits they have and especially the style of their personality. Yet when you distance yourself from this basic stuff, you begin to realise that no human person is here on earth accidentally or neutrally. Each person is a living world of longing, we may even say, an incarnation of longing. Behind image, role, personality, and certainly far deeper than our overrated thoughts, there is a pulse of desire that sustains us in the world. And it is this desire, this longing that keeps the fire of life kindled. The human heart is never still, there is a

divine restlessness in each of us which creates a continual state of longing. There are always new thoughts and experiences and opportunities emerging in life. Some delight and surprise us others can make us more than a little anxious, at least at first. But in the words of Stan Hegel, “Your life belongs in a visible, outer consistency; but your inner life is nomadic.” Your longing takes you on inner voyages that no one would ever guess. Longing is the deepest and most ancient voice in the human soul, the driving force of all creativity and imagination, keeping the door open and calling us towards the gifts and blessings that God has so lovingly prepared.

It is faithfulness to this longing that may cause us to relocate, leaving behind family and friends. Or to accept a lesser income in order to undertake the work that we feel passionate about. Longing comforts and heals the bereaved, and it will, if acknowledged raise up those broken by tragedy, calling them to reinvent their lives. This is why we are infused with restless longing. Deep down, we desire to come back into the intimate unity of belonging. In the face of this good news I guess I would feel a little negligent if I didn't remind you, and warn you, that consumerism and its greed are an awful perversion of our longing, they damage our very ability to actually experience life. They clutter our lives with things we don't need and subvert our sense of priority. They reduce everything to its most basic common denominator. Consumerism writes John O'Donohue, “Leaves us marooned in a cul-de-sac of demented longing. Having closed off to sacredness and mystery, all becomes as though dead, its discourse sounds inane and its language forsaken, harsh words that certainly ring of truth.

Our longing is an echo of the divine longing. Our longing is as a mirrored reflection of Gods longing for us, as in lover and beloved. The desire in our souls is passionate, restless, and endless because God is always calling us home. Our longing is the living imprint of divine desire nothing else can satisfy or still us. We may try many other paths but always end up singing the Rolling Stones classic, ‘I can't get no satisfaction.’

In the beautifully captured spirit of our lady in the gospel, may we draw near with faith and longing to this eucharist today believing that if we can just touch and glimpse the real presence of Christ, we will not be disappointed. Real presence is eternity become radiant; such is the power and vitality available to

us. God never grows weary He is like the restless artist who tirelessly seeks to make our presence real in order that the mystery we harbour may become known to us. I conclude today with a Celtic Blessing adapted by John O'Donohue from Eternal Echoes:

May you have joy and peace  
in the temple of your longing;  
May you receive great encouragement  
when new frontiers beckon;  
May you respond to the call of your gift  
and find the courage to follow its path;  
May the warmth of your heart keep your presence  
afire and anxiety never linger about you;  
May your outer dignity mirror an inner dignity of soul;  
May you take time to celebrate  
the quiet miracles that seek no attention;  
May you be consoled in the secret symmetry of your soul;  
May you experience each day as a sacred gift  
woven around the heart of wonder.